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The Shipley Ancestry of Lincoln's Mother

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The Shipley Ancestry of Lincoln's Mother

By Louis A. Warren

Reverence for the burial places of those making significant contributions to our national life has placed upon Indiana the responsibility of preserving and beautifying the grave of the mother who gave Abraham Lincoln to America. It is doubtful if there is to be found in all the country a lone woman's grave which has become so sacred a shrine as the grave of Nancy Hanks Lincoln. The commonwealth of Indiana is now awakened to its full responsibility as the custodian of her remains.

Another task which devolves upon the state, because of the early residence of Nancy Hanks Lincoln within its borders, is the preservation in the state archives of an authoritative biographical sketch of her life. The data which should be assembled first is authentic information about her parents and ancestors. It is the present purpose to present a brief history of her mother's people, the Shipleys. The feature magazine writers and biographical debunkers having had their say about the mother of Nancy Hanks, possibly those who are interested may be willing to consider the testimonies of some of the members of the family from which she came.

Many years ago Mrs. Caroline Hanks Hitchcock of Cambridge, Massachusetts, did an exhaustive and painstaking piece of work in which she attempted to discover something about the parentage of Nancy Hanks. While it must be admitted that some data was supplied to her that was erroneous, she did not deserve the chastising and bitter denunciation which she received at the hands of one Lincoln biographer in particular, as the main thesis of her work can now be substantiated.[1]

More recently, however, certain Hoosier historians, directly related to the mother of President Lincoln, have compiled family traditions, supported by authorized records, which contribute much to the task before us. Their findings are supported by many testimonials originating from independent sources in several different states. It was an Indianapolis woman, Mrs. C. H. S. Vawter, who was responsible for the first and most important discovery with reference to the his-

[1] Caroline Hanks Hitchcock, *Nancy Hanks: The Story of Abraham Lincoln's Mother* (New York, 1900).

tory of Nancy Hanks.[2] Through Mrs. Vawter's insistence and encouragement her Uncle, Mitchell Thompson, urged the county clerk of Washington County, Kentucky, to search for the marriage records of Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks. The finding of the marriage certificate put a stop to the circulation of stories to the effect that the parents of Lincoln were never legally married.

Another fact of importance which was learned from the marriage papers was the evidence that Richard Berry was the guardian of Nancy Hanks at the time of her marriage. The signature of Berry supported the tradition that Mrs. Vawter had recorded in a letter as early as 1873 when she urged that the mother of Nancy Hanks and the wife of the elder Richard Berry were sisters. On September 14, 1895, Mrs. Vawter wrote to Mrs. Hitchcock: "Nancy Hanks' mother's name before marriage was Shipley and she was a Virginian. There were, I think, six sisters in the Shipley family but I only remember the names of the husbands of two [three]: Richard Berry (Sr.) and Robert Mitchell, my great-grandfather, and Mr. Hanks, Nancy's father."[3]

No one can dispute the fact that the name of a Richard Berry appears on the marriage bond and that he signed as guardian of Nancy Hanks. Kentucky laws regarding the appointment of guardians support the tradition that Berry was a relative of Nancy Hanks. The Richard Berry who married Rachel Shipley was dead by 1797 and his will names his wife, Rachel, and several children including a son, Richard.[4] It was this Richard Berry, Jr., who was the guardian of Nancy Hanks at the time of her marriage.

Richard Berry, Jr., and Polly Ewing were married in Mercer County, Kentucky, on October 10, 1794.[5] One of Richard's children, Robert Mitchell Berry, died in Callaway County Missouri, in 1913, at the age of ninety-five years. This paragraph appeared in the newspaper obituary notice:

> His father [Richard Berry, Jr.] was a man of considerable wealth, and while a resident of Kentucky reared Nancy Hanks, the mother of Abraham Lincoln and at her wedding signed the marriage bond of her husband.[6]

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[2] Grace Vawter Bucknell, *History of the Vawter Family*, 142-144.

[3] Mrs. Vawter's letter is in the files of the Lincoln Life Foundation, Fort Wayne, Ind.

[4] Washington County (Ky.) Court Will Book, 134.

[5] Washington County (Ky.) Court Marriage Register.

[6] Clipping from a local newspaper in the files of the Lincoln Life Foundation, Fort Wayne, Indiana.

Another descendant of this same Richard Berry, Jr., testifies that "Richard Berry, Sr., married a Shipley who was a sister of Nancy Hanks Lincoln's mother. They took little Nancy to live with them when she was left an orphan but she later went to live in the home of Richard Berry, Jr."[7] There is an abundance of evidence to prove that the wife of Richard Berry, Sr., was a Rachel Shipley. One grandchild was named Berry Shipley Redding. Edward Shipley's name appears in the settlement of the estate of John Berry, oldest son of Richard Berry, Sr.[8]

Evidence that the mother of Nancy Hanks was a sister of Rachel Shipley, who married Richard Berry, Sr., comes down through several branches of the Berry family who have testified to the authenticity of this fact. While it is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the home environment of Nancy Hanks during the years when she was growing to maturity, it is sufficient to say that it was one of culture and refinement and far different from the picture so often drawn of her early years.

Some time after Rachel Berry moved to Kentucky her sister, Naomi Shipley Mitchell, followed her. Naomi was the wife of Robert Mitchell. She was massacred by the Indians when the family was attacked while en route to Kentucky. Her daughter, Sarah Shipley Mitchell, named for her mother's people, was captured by the Indians during the same attack and a few years later upon having been returned to her relatives became the constant associate of Nancy Hanks, her first cousin. It was for this Sarah Shipley Mitchell that Nancy Hanks most likely named her first child, Sarah Lincoln. It is interesting also that Sarah Mitchell who married John Thompson named one of her daughters, Nancy. A nephew of Sarah Shipley Mitchell was named Tom Shipley Mitchell.

Another former Indianapolis woman, Miss Kate Thompson, has done more original research work on the Mitchell-Shipley connections than anyone else and the author on several occasions through interviews and correspondence has been assisted and encouraged by her findings. An old Mitchell Bible is still extant which reveals that Naomi, wife of Robert Mitchell, was born April 26, 1748, and that the second child was

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[7] Mary E. Hayes Moutrey to the writer, March 24, 1931.

[8] Mercer County (Ky.) Will Book II, 273.

born April 26, 1773. Sarah S. Mitchell, her daughter, was born in North Carolina.[9]

Another one of the Shipley sisters that we have been able to trace is Ann who married David McCord. The following family tradition comes from Rockville, Indiana: "My husband's grandfather, James McCord, was a son of David and Ann Shipley McCord and was five years old when they made the trip from North Carolina to Kentucky. . . . We have been told that there were five Shipley brothers in the Revolution."[10] Members of this family have always known of their relationship to Abraham Lincoln. Many interesting traditions of the North Carolina days have been preserved by them. Further identification of this Ann Shipley comes from a resident of Vincennes, Indiana, who says: "My grandmother was Jane Caldwell McCord and I find her grandfather was David McCord whose wife was Ann Shipley. Their eldest son was born October 5, 1766."[11]

The search for the fourth Shipley sister leads also to North Carolina. Here one finds that Margaret Shipley married Robert Sloan. A great-granddaughter of Margaret writes: "Margaret Shipley, my great grandmother, first married Robert Sloan who was killed or died in the Revolutionary War."[12] In another letter the same person records that "Abraham Lincoln's grandmother was a Shipley and married a Hanks. Her daughter, Nancy Hanks, went to relatives in Kentucky and married a Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln's grandmother and my great-grandmother, Margaret Shipley, were sisters."[13] It does not seem that there can be any doubt about the relationship of four Shipley sisters who were daughters of Robert and Sarah Shipley.

It will be noted that in all of these traditions about the four Shipley sisters there is always the same story about a fifth sister, Lucy, who married a Hanks said to be James Hanks. It will also be observed that tradition claims she was a widow before reaching Kentucky and had a daughter, Nancy, who married a Lincoln. Evidence from many sources now seems to con-

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[9] Vital Statistics for Washington County (Ky.), Kentucky State Historical Society Archives.

[10] Mrs. Oscar McCord to the writer, July 1, 1929.

[11] R. C. Sampson to the writer, May 27, 1929.

[12] Mary Ellen Armstrong to the writer, March 24, 1933.

[13] Miss Armstrong to the writer, Feb. 29, 1933.

firm the fact that Lucy Shipley, daughter of Robert Shipley, who became the wife of James Hanks was the mother of Nancy Hanks. Lucy Shipley's sister, Naomi, was born April 26, 1748; her sister Ann's first child was born in 1766; her sister Rachel's third child was married in 1781. Lucy was probably one of the youngest children, as her daughter, Nancy, was born not much earlier than 1785.

The Beech Fork community in Washington County, Kentucky, where Richard Berry, Sr., uncle of Nancy Hanks, first settled, was also the home community of the Widow Lincoln and her five orphan children, Thomas Lincoln, the youngest son, becoming the playmate of Nancy Hanks who lived with the Berry's but a short distance away. In this community there also lived the Mitchells, Brumfields, and other relatives, and in the adjacent community on Doctor's Fork lived Edward and George Shipley, the Hankses, Sparrows, and other relatives. Richard Berry, Sr., also owned a farm on Doctor's Fork where his oldest son, John, lived.

When Lucy Shipley Hanks reached Kentucky, she married as her second husband, Henry Sparrow, and at this time made affidavit that she was above twenty-one years of age and her brother-in-law, Robert Mitchell, testified to this fact. It was sometime after this second marriage that her daughter, Nancy, went to live with her Uncle and Aunt, Richard and Rachel Berry.[14] The Mercer County, Kentucky, census for the year 1810 reveals that Lucy was over 45 years of age at that time. This would place her birth as early as 1765. That she was living as late as 1820 is revealed by the census of that year. She is said to have passed away about 1825, which would have made her at least sixty years old at that time and probably older.

It appears from the census of 1810 that Lucy had nine children by Henry Sparrow, five boys and four girls. Two of the boys became ministers and there is nothing but words of commendation for the wholesome atmosphere of her home and the integrity of her children.[15]

The Shipleys and their kinsmen came to Washington County, Kentucky, from Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, where we find that Robert and Sarah Shipley were established

[14] Mercer County (Ky.), Marriage Register, 1790.

[15] Mercer County Tax Reports, Kentucky State Historical Society Archives.

and where they continued to live after their children had migrated. Correspondence from a member of the Shipley family still living near the old home definitely locates the Shipley residence in North Carolina: "Robert Mitchell and Robert Sloan both of whom married Shipleys lived near the Catawba River on the Mecklenburg side. The Berrys were on the Western or Gaston side of the river. All these people were [earlier] friends and neighbors in Virginia."[16]

Other descendants of Robert Sloan and his wife, Margaret Shipley, have preserved traditions about the Shipley family. A great-great-granddaughter of Margaret Shipley Sloan who lives in North Carolina not far from where the Shipleys settled has this to say about the family: "The Shipleys were here, we know, and they kept coming and going until after the revolution. A few lingered, others went to Kentucky. It is known positively that two members of the Hanks family, Richard (Dickey) and James, were here and heads of families in 1790. This is proven by the census. James is supposed by some to have been the father of Nancy."[17]

The evidence that the residence of the Shipleys was in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, is not based entirely on tradition. The court records affirm the location of the residence as well as the family contacts. On April 18, 1772, Robert Shipley purchased a tract of land from David McCord and Annie, his wife. Edward and George Shipley were witnesses to the transaction. Robert Mitchell also purchased land from McCord. Robert Shipley sold the land acquired from McCord in 1789.

With equal certainty the North Carolina colony of Shipleys can be traced back to Bedford County, Virginia. Robert and Sarah Shipley, parents of the Shipley daughters, left Bedford County for North Carolina in 1771 as is evident from records in the Bedford County Court. Although we know that Robert's wife's first name was Sarah, we do not know her maiden name, and, while we have discovered the names of five of their daughters, the names of their sons are not certainly known, although it appears that Robert, Jr., Edward, and George were their children.

Robert Shipley's name first appears on the Virginia Records in 1750 where it is found on a commissioner's book in Lunen-

[16] Mrs. Minnie S. Puett to the writer, April 27, 1933.

[17] Mrs. Puett to the writer, March 28, 1933.

burg County as a tithable, indicating he was over twenty-one years of age, and the head of a family. William Caldwell according to the court order was appointed to make out the tax list for Lunenburg County in the territory "from Little Roanoke up the Fork." The list contained among others the names of Robert Shipley, Richard Berry, and Robert Mitchell. Richard Berry married Rachel Shipley, daughter of Robert Shipley, and Robert Mitchell married Naomi Shipley, Rachel's sister, as indicated earlier in this paper. It is also interesting to note that a John Caldwell was appointed administrator of the estate of the pioneer Abraham Lincoln who died in Kentucky in 1786, the Caldwells then having moved to Washington County, Kentucky.

Another list giving the names of those subject to military call in 1758 in Lunenburg County contains the name of Robert Shipley, who in 1765 purchased a tract of land in Lunenburg County. Part of this land was sold in 1767, and on April 30, 1771, Robert and his wife, Sarah, sold the remaining 164 acres to Daniel Mitchell. It will be recalled that Naomi Shipley married Robert Mitchell and that Richard Berry's oldest son, John, married Ann Mitchell.

On September 16, 1765, Robert Shipley entered 314 acres of land on Little Falling River then in Lunenburg County, but, with the formation of Bedford County within its boundaries, the land fell within the newly organized county.[18] Here also lived the Mitchells, Berrys, Hankses, and other families which we find in both the North Carolina and Kentucky communities where these related groups settled.

When Campbell County, Virginia, was cut off from Bedford, many of these families found their land within the new county and in the Deed Books of the court we find land transactions of the Hankses, Mitchells, Prewitts, etc., which show that their lands were adjacent. In Charlotte County also the Hankses, Berrys, Mitchells, etc., are found in the same general community.

Just when Robert Shipley moved to Virginia we do not know but the traditions in the various branches of the family

[18] Book of Patents, 1764-1767, State House, Richmond, Va.

are agreed that he migrated to Virginia from Maryland.[19] The Maryland records prove conclusively that the Robert Shipley of Bedford County, Virginia, was a son of Robert Shipley, Sr., of Ann Arundel County, Maryland, who named the following children in his will in 1767: Charles, Robert, Ruth (or Rachel), Ketura, Elizabeth, Sarah, Lois, George, and William. The last named sons, William and George, were made executors of their father's estate. It is significant to note that the two youngest sons were made executors, suggesting that the older sons were not available for this service. The migration of the older sons, Charles and Robert, is in accord with the family tradition. Later on George is said to have migrated so that William was eventually the only son to remain in Maryland.

It is very fortunate that the births of all of these children are recorded in the records of Christ Church, Queen Caroline Parrish, as we are able to definitely establish the date of Robert Shipley's birth as October 9, 1713. Robert Shipley was named for his father, Robert Shipley, Sr., whose wife's name was Elizabeth, but there is a possibility that Robert, Sr. was married twice. Robert Shipley, Sr., was a member of Christ's Church, Queen Caroline Parrish, and in 1736 he held pew No. 11. It is interesting to note that a William Hanks was in possession of pew No. 28. Shipley was a member of the first vestry of the church.

It must be something more than a coincidence that the Shipleys and Hanks families are found associated in Maryland as we find they were also in the same communities in Virginia, North Carolina, and Kentucky. It would not be surprising if we should find that in William Hanks of Maryland we have an ancestor of President Lincoln although no evidence of this connection is available.

Robert Shipley, Sr., received a tract of land from the estate of his father, Adam Shipley, consisting of 240 acres and the farm was called "Shipley's discovery." It was on the Patopsco River south of Great Falls. This land was surveyed in 1724. In 1742 Robert sold 140 acres to Nathan Barnes and two years later he sold the remaining 110 acres to Peter Por-

[19] Two women, Mrs. L. O. White of Brookline, Mass. and Mrs. J. F. Rudolph of Warren, Ohio, the latter related to the Hanks family, have done much original research work on the Shipley and Hanks connections in Maryland and Virginia and the author is greatly indebted to them. Among the members of the Shipley family who have contributed information about the family in Maryland are Mrs. Winchester Britton, Mrs. Marvin R. Shipley, and Miss Aramintia Shipley.

ter. The elder Shipley then acquired a large farm near Sykesville, Maryland, and it was here that he made his home the rest of his life.

This brings us back to the first man, in America, to whom the Lincoln branch of the Shipley family traces its ancestry. His name was Adam Shipley and he settled in Maryland in 1668, not far from Annapolis. In 1681 a tract of land was surveyed for him bordering on the Severn River. It consisted of 200 acres and was called "Shipley's Choice."

Adam's wife was named Lois and she died a widow in 1725. How many years before this Adam passed away is not known. Tradition claims there were nine sons and two daughters born to Adam and Lois Shipley. The names of but three of them are known: Richard, Robert, and Lois.

The line of descent from Adam Shipley to Abraham Lincoln as it has now been traced follows: Adam Shipley and wife, Lois; Robert Shipley, Sr., and wife, Elizabeth; Robert Shipley, Jr., and wife, Sarah; Lucy Shipley and husband, James Hanks; Nancy Hanks and husband, Thomas Lincoln; Abraham Lincoln.

While it appears that Abraham Lincoln is a descendant of Adam Shipley of the Maryland branch of the American Shipleys, this discussion of the Shipley family may properly conclude with a summary of the other family groups and the states where they seem to have originated: Massachusetts Branch—John and Ann Shipley who settled at Salem in 1683; Pennsylvania Branch—William and Elizabeth Shipley who lived at Springfield, Delaware County, as early as 1729; New Jersey Branch—Samuel Shipley, who was born in England in 1831, but who did not arrive in America until some years later; Virginia Branch—John and Mary Shipley who settled in Gloucester County in 1668.

There were many Shipley families in Indiana during pioneer days. Some of them and the counties in which they lived are herewith appended together with the dates of the records which establish their residence in Indiana.

Fayette County: Philip, 1819; Margaret, 1821; Elizabeth, 1924; Rebecca, 1825; Peter, 1826; Peter, 1830; Thomas, 1830; Harmon, 1830; Peter, 1830.

Monroe County: Ruben, 1835; Catinah, 1840; Prudence, 1840; Lucy Ann, 1849.

Morgan County: Jesse, 1830; Benjamin, 1830; Edward, 1830; William, 1830; Talbott, 1832; James, 1835; Benjamin, 1838; Emily, 1839; Margaret, 1841; Jacob, no date.

Parke County: Cynthia Ann, 1838; Violet, 1839; Mary, 1840.

Putnam County: Daniel, 1830; William, 1838; Mathias,——; Jesse I., 1841; Daniel C., 1841; Geo. W., 1851; John, 1851; Richard, 1851

Rush County: Charles, 1857; Thomas, 1849; George, 1830; Jas. W., ——; Chas. E.——.

Sullivan: Jared, 1830.

Tippecanoe: Mary Ann, 1832; Lavina, 1848.

Vigo: Michael, 1828.

Warren: Johnathan, 1830.

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